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Focusing on Older Couples in Denmark

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Understanding Care Giving and Care Taking Experiences throughout the Life Course – Focusing on Older Couples in Denmark

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1. Introduction

The systems of providing welfare services interact with older people's everyday lives in a very complex way. Not only the arrangements of systems as such but also the availability of services influence their possibilities and constraints at an everyday level and shape what roles they play within the social network of their everyday lives. These interactions are long-term changing processes as both the systems and wide-ranging conditions in everyday life are neither static nor immutable. However, the long-term interactions of welfare systems and everyday life have, so far, not been explored sufficiently with a qualitative approach.

In particular, the present paper draws attention to how older people, specifically couples, understand the ways that the welfare systems interact with their everyday lives throughout the life course. The demographic change and extended longevity have increasingly stimulated discussions concerning the role of elderly people in society and their socio-economic and political implications due to their growing importance in modern life. Moreover, older couples' understandings of their interaction with the welfare systems at the everyday level reflect upon both their past and present experiences and practices, and this reflection results in forming a significant part of their views and expectations for the future.

Guided by life course approach, the analysis focuses specifically on older couples in Denmark, and explores the following questions; how have older Danish couples experienced care giving and care taking over the life course? How do they perceive these experiences? How have older Danish couples' experienced mutual support and communication with children, grandchildren, parents, neighbours and friends? How do their understandings exert influence on the forming of expectations and views for the future? The empirical core of the analysis is the qualitative data derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews with couples aged 65 and over in Denmark. This contribution is a part of a PhD project that is a comparative study of Denmark and Japan. However, the present paper is based on the preliminary findings from Denmark since the interviews in Japan are ongoing and will be concluded by the end of February 2014.

2. Conceptual Framework and Background Literature

2-1. Welfare Services and Everyday Life

Comparative studies of welfare state typologies have increasingly been developed during the last two decades. Esping-Andersen's seminal work of welfare (state) regime theory (1990, 1999) is of the greatest importance to the field of study in the last two decades. He classified industrial societies, mostly western societies into three regime types: liberal, corporatist and social democratic. In so doing he has used several indices, but mostly the level of de-commodification. De-commodification refers to "the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation (Esping-Andersen 1990; pp. 37)." In other words, de-commodification is used to measure the degree to which that the welfare states suspend individuals from the market dependency.

In liberal welfare (state) regimes, the state intervention is very limited. Benefits from social security programmes are generally targeted at the low-income group, and social assistance is means-tested. Anglo-Saxon countries including the United States and the United Kingdom represent this model. The conservative regime represented by Germany, predominantly preserves traditional and corporatist status differentials. Assistance is usually residual, which means that the state intervenes only if the family or other groups and organizations fail to fulfill their 'duties'. Finally, the social democratic regime encompasses countries in which welfare principles are in theory extended universally and applied also to the middle class. This regime type is highly de-commodified. Scandinavian countries represent this type. This Esping-Andersen's typology, first published in 1990, has evoked considerable discussion in comparative studies of welfare states and social policy.

It is widely understood that Scandinavian, or Nordic, countries including Denmark have a representative model in their approach to welfare, the so-called Scandinavian/Nordic welfare model, which aims to achieve a high degree of equality for all citizens via generous public provision (Esping-Andersen 1990; Kemeny 1995; Siim 1997). In the abovementioned work of Esping-Andersen in 1990 and 1999, Denmark was placed within the social democratic welfare regime.

Some scholars point out that the studies of welfare systems, states and social policy have a considerable focus on cash transfers, but disregard social and welfare services which are actually delivered to citizens (Bambara 2005; Jensen 2008). Bambara (2005) for instance challenges Esping-Andersen's welfare regime theory by comparing the de-commodification levels of cash benefits programmes and health care services. Her findings, from the quantitative data analysis of the same 18 OECD countries as in Esping-Andersen's work, inform us of the important role of the provision of services, leading to five clusters which differ from the 'three' worlds of capitalism.

These studies ultimately aimed to challenge the discussions of welfare regime theory, which is not a main argument of this paper. Nevertheless, their emphasis on welfare services calls for attention to recognising the importance of welfare services and this has significant implications for

understanding our everyday experiences. For instance, Kuronen's study of motherhood of lone mothers and child care service in Finland and Scotland (2001) indicates the importance of looking into social and welfare services which organise and structure local practices of the single mothers in question. She claims that looking into the locality, in other words, the perspective from inside is especially critical in order to gain the understanding of what it means to be mother in particular cultural and social contexts. Accordingly, the arrangement of social and welfare services are also crucial to everyday experiences of older people. The interplay between the welfare arrangement and everyday experiences of older people influence what roles they play within the social network of their everyday lives. For example, the ways both child and elder care are formulated influences the nature of older people's caregiving and caretaking *vis-à-vis* the younger and sometimes even older members of the family.

2-2. Complementarity Role of Family

The government is indeed an important provider of the welfare services in Scandinavia countries including Denmark. In this context, family's care activities are generally understood less intense. However, literatures on 'crowding out' vs. 'crowding in' (or 'substitution' vs. 'complementarity') inform us that families and public services do not necessarily show a clear substitution relationship (Harlofson and Hagestad 2012). In other words, highly 'de-familialised' welfare states have not crowded out informal care. Motel-Kilingebiel and his colleagues (2005), for instance, show that, based on the quantitative analysis of Norway, England, Germany, Spain and Israel, "there is not just a trade-off between family and service support" and "the total volume of support is greater in the well-developed welfare state".

However, the varieties in the degree of 'de-familialisation' of social policy arrangements may influence what support the family provides, what motivate the family to provide support – including the point of whether they are willing to help or feeling burden to do so. In other words, the arrangements of welfare systems and the availability – or unavailability – of services to a significant degree shape possibilities and constraints at an everyday level, which influence what roles older couples in Denmark play within the social network of their everyday lives.

2-3. The Life Course Approach

These interactions of social policy and everyday life are long-term changing processes as both the arrangements of social policy and wide-ranging conditions in everyday life are neither static nor immutable. Thus, the life course approach is of great relevance.

Over a few decades, the academic interests in the temporal order within the life courses have grown and these interests have evolved into the life course approach, which serves to reveal the social and structural mechanisms that underlie the entirety of our life trajectories. As Anxo and

Boulin (2006) highlight well, the life course approach regards 'sequences' of life events and life stages as important, but not focuses only on specific events, time periods or demographic groups. This 'holistic' view is central in the approach.

The life course approach has evolved into the arena of institutions and social policies in particular within the European scholarship. Two German researchers, Mayer and Müller (1986) examined mechanisms wherein the development of the welfare state in Germany penetrates deep into the individual course of life. Mayer (2001) further evolved this discussion of welfare states and life courses, and elaborated the concept of 'life course regimes', which are understood as outcomes of differing configuration of welfare systems at the individual level across countries. These life course regimes are firmly rooted in individual educational pathway, employment biography and family trajectory. As Leisering (2003) summarises, within the European scholarship, "the life course itself is seen as a social institution, its emergence as the 'institutionalization of the life course.' In this view, the life course is a new social structure in its own right, an 'institutional program' that defines a 'normal biography', not just a 'pattern of socially defined, age-graded events and roles.' ... In a broader sense, the life course is conceived as the interface of institutional control (macro) and individual strategies of action (micro) (pp.207)."

The trend of combining two dimensions, the life course and welfare states, has furthered especially from a European perspective with more specific foci on different policy areas. For instance, Anxo and his colleagues (2011) thoroughly demonstrated that, based on empirical data of nine European countries, different institutional contexts have markedly influenced on shaping unique patterns of life courses. Their analysis demonstrated that "institutions that provide support at key life stages may not only open up new choices for individuals but also reduce the risks associated with increasingly heterogeneous life courses and erratic employment trajectories and the scarring effects of critical transitions (pp.64)". Naeyele, Barkfoldt, Vroom, Goul Andersen and Krämer (2010) have adapted the life course approach into analysis of working life. They developed a concept, 'time arrangement' which reflects on individual and collective social preferences and needs in addition to institutional options and constraints.

Although some classic writings in sociology paid attention to the significance of taking age and sex into account simultaneously (for instance Linton 1942), gender perspective has been in general a marginal point in life course research for a long time (Widmer and Ritschard 2009). For example, it was completely neglected in Mayer and Müller's discussion of welfare states having impacted on framing life courses of people (1986).

Neugarten is one of a few who had recognised that age and sex have to be discussed at the same time (Hagestad 1996). Describing the case of the United States, Moen (1996) also illuminates the intersection of age and gender. Socio-cultural ideologies associated with age and gender simultaneously prescribe social behaviours and roles over the life course. It means that men and

women are very likely to pursue different life trajectories over the life course so that the gender perspective is inseparable from that of ageing (Moen 1995). Arber (2005) investigates the ways in which the marital status impact on men's and women's lives over the life course. Her discussion shows that gendered marital biographies lead men and women to having access to different resources in their later lives (ex. pension and social contacts). This means that older men and women *inherit* advantages or disadvantages accumulated from the past lives to their later lives. Therefore, "the present material circumstances and social relationships of older people can only be understood by reference to their past, both present and past being reflected in the categorization of marital status (Arber 2005: p. 136)."

This gender difference of life course experiences is a major motivation for this study to focus on older couples. Particularly, looking into older couples but not just an individual provides an understanding of what it means to have been a couple over their life course. Moreover, the studies on older couples have been scarce whereas there have been numerous researches which centre on older individuals. The few attempts to examine older couples have been conducted with limited consideration, particularly interrelation between the health and psychological aspects of marriage in later life or supportive role of the elderly spouse in caregiving (Walker and Luszcz 2009). Furthermore, the state of being single or with a partner - often in marriage for the modern-day elderly - can lead to a significant difference in wide-ranging aspects of everyday life in old age such as where and with whom they do what.

Guided by the life course approach, this paper draws attentions specifically to older couples' understanding of care giving and taking experiences over the life course. The background literature has informed us that the changing arrangements of welfare systems and accordingly availability – or/and unavailability – of welfare services shape the possibilities and constraints at everyday level over the life course of individuals. However, people's understandings and perceptions of this dynamics have been little investigated so far. How people understand and perceive the experiences by linking their past and present to future views would provide significant implications for future policy making.

The analysis focuses specifically on older couples in Denmark, and explores the following questions; how have older Danish couples experienced care giving and care taking over the life course? How do they perceive these experiences? How have older Danish couples' experienced mutual support and communication with children, grandchildren, parents, neighbours and friends? How do their understandings exert influence on the forming of expectations and views for the future?

3. Postwar Modernization - Shifting to The 'Dual-Earner Family Model' / Standardisation of the Life Course

In what follows, I give a brief overview of postwar modernisation experienced by the modern day older people in Denmark with regard to men's and women's life courses as the background context for the following analysis. The older Danish people have lived the time of a societal transition where the individual has become the primary unit in determining public provisions despite of gender. In Denmark, most laws, rights, benefits and obligations have been directed at the individual based on citizenship. This individual orientation underpinned by the universal principle has had a great influence on the women's position in families and relation to the labour market (Knudsen 1999). In the 1950s, 75 per cent of married women were homemakers (Brunse 2013). The male breadwinner family model was predominant. Married couples had joint taxation and a married man received higher unemployment benefits until the 1970s. Reflecting upon this transitional period, some of interviewees combine a time of being a housewife without any occupation and some other time with either full-time or part-time jobs.

It was around the 70s and the 80s, when the dual-earner family model gradually became pervasive in Denmark (Siim 1993). The universal public provision of welfare services have been traditionally recognised as a distinctive feature of the Nordic welfare model. In addition to equal access to universal services and support for all citizens, the Danish government has extended the welfare system to provide extensively high quality services including financial support in particular for children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled. The implication of this kind of universal welfare provision focusing on those people is that families externalise their traditional obligations, which has resulted in a large participation of females in the labour market. The labour market participation rate between 15 and 64 years old for women has been about 75 per cent since the mid-80s, and 85 per cent for men (Goul Andersen 2002). In those days, females' roles dramatically changed. There have been numerous discussions on the achievement of gender equality among feminists in Denmark, and several scholars point out segregation of jobs and disparity of payments between both genders (Siim 1993). However, women's position as workers as well as citizens is more pronounced in Denmark compared to most of the industrialised societies.

On the other hand, males have also experienced a transformation of the institutional expectation for them even though it took place slower than that for women (Siim 1993). According to Siim, public policies have aimed at strengthening the legal rights of fathers during 1980s through extending the amount of time that men could take as the paternity leave. In those days, a mother and a father shared 26 weeks of the parental leave, and the paternity leave was extended from two weeks to ten weeks out of the total share in 1985. 90 per cent of the father's income was guaranteed during his leave. In terms of career patters and family life, the standardised life courses for men and women had become less gendered around the time when modern-day older people formed their family and actively worked.

4. Method and Data

The empirical data collection is primarily based on in-depth interviews with older couples above 65 years old. The interviews are conducted based on a semi-structured interview guide, which is inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann's semi-structured life world interview (2009). The interview questions include everyday routines, experiences about care taking and giving to and from parents, children and grandchildren, relationship with neighbours and friends and other related questions. All interviews are recorded. In this paper, a Danish couple who live in a suburban neighbourhood of Aarhus and two in Aalborg. Both Aalborg and Aarhus are among the major cities in Denmark.

Three couples were born between the late 30s and the beginning of the 40s, which means before the end of the Second World War. Before providing an analysis of the couples, some work history and their family structure is briefly introduced;

Couple 1: Anne and Oscar

The husband, Oscar was a technical staff at an institute of a university for 40 years and then retired when he was 67 years old. The wife, Anne was a part time cleaning lady at a school for hairdressers and retired at the age of 60. They have two children – a son and a daughter. The son lives in the same city as them and drops by their place frequently for a short time. The daughter is married and has two children. Her family lives in the capital of Denmark, Copenhagen, which is approximately 300 km away from Anne and Oscar's place. The couple meet them about once a month.

Couple 2: Gunhild and Bjarne

The husband, Bjarne was an English and French teacher at a high school also for 40 years. He retired when he became 70 years old. The wife, Gunhild was a bio analyst at a hospital and retired at the age of 65. She had some period of not working, thus have worked for around 30 years in total. They have three children – a son and two daughters. The son and one of the daughters live in Copenhagen. The other daughter lives in Herning. In total, they have seven grandchildren. They meet their families including grandchildren around five to seven times a year.

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Couple 3: Sanne and Georg

The husband, Georg was mainly a sales driver at several companies. He went on to early retirement when he was 62. The wife, Sanne was an office worker in different places and also went onto the early retirement when her company at that time went bankruptcy, and started receiving pension at the age of 65. She also had some period of not working and of doing part-time. They have two children – a daughter and a son, both are married and live close to their place (2 and 10 km away

respectively), therefore they often see each other. In total, they have four grandchildren.

5. Preliminary Findings

5-1. Looking After Grandchildren

Most of the interviewed couples have grandchildren, and they often provide some help for grandchild rearing especially when they are/were small. The common examples in their stories are to pick them up at either day care or kindergarten and look after them until their parents get off work. When the grandchildren get sick and it is difficult for their parents to take day offs from their work, then the couples also try to help the situation. Sanne explained how they helped their children;

We have a daughter in law working in a shop, Føtex. She was working till 8 o'clock in the evening two times a week, and one day We picked up the kids from daycare and had them till our son got off work, so they would come home with us and it was a regular thing that we picked up kids for 5 or 6 years every Thursday, because first one of the children, then the other, they were at the same place and that fitted us nicely, because then we could easily pick them up. (Sanne)

Whether they live close to each other and how old grandchildren are, these are important factors of how grandparents interact with their grandchildren. Some of the couples live far from their children and grandchildren, thus they tend to gather for seasonal events such as Easter, Christmas and family members' birthdays but not provide help with childrearing because it is difficult. However, physical distances are sometimes not an obstacle, for instance, Gunhild who lives in Aalborg commented;

I have done that on several occasions, at times I have had to take a flight (to Copenhagen) to help my son look after his kids. Early in the morning, he would then pick me up at the airport. I have also taken a bus there. (Gunhild)

She also explained why she even flew to her son's place;

When the kids had been sick for several days, and they (her children) could not get off of work anymore, I would take the bus over there. I have done that to Herning as well, not only Copenhagen.

From their stories, it seems that their help in 'grandchild rearing' is important for their

children's family; "my daughter in law expressed to me how grateful that she had been that we had been there for them to take care of their children when they were small (Sanne)." The couples also like it as they said in the interview; however, they do not want it to be their burden.

When the grandchildren were small, there are only one month between the two eldest grandkids, and then I said, "I do not want to be a daycare center everyday from 6-5, I will take them when they are sick or if they have vacation or something, then I can be a guest daycare", and I was doing that for 5-7 years. At that time it was them that got our time, but now they are 14, 15, 16, 17 so they do not need Grandmother anymore, I mean in that way, but they always know where we are. (Sanne)

5-2. Care for their Parents and Reflections on the Previous Experiences

All the three couples' parents have passed away. Some of their parents have died all of sudden because of heart attacks or stroke. Some of the couples had been heavily engaged in taking care of their parents. It took place at the hospitals, nursing homes or at their parents' places. Anne had taken care of her parents and her husband's mother when they became frail. She had a part time job in the afternoon; therefore she had time to help them in the morning.

I went shopping (for her mother in law), and I was there eating with her or were there when she had to eat, because it was hard for her to do it by herself. Not that she physically couldn't, but mentally, and that makes sense, it is comfy to have company. (Anne)

Living together with their parents could be also one of options to be considered. Even though Sanne did not want to do so, it was a thing that she would mention as 'I did not want'. If it was the thing that she even did not consider doing, she may have phrased differently (in fact some couples chose to live with their parents but not the three couples focused in this paper).

I did it in the way that he became demented, and it was necessary to get rid of the house he was living in. And I will be frank, I did not want my father to stay with us, because my mother had died when she had been 58, and this was approximately 10 years after this. So, we did not know how long time that it would take, (if they let him stay). Also I didn't want to because of our conflicting lifestyles, I told him after my mother died that he could not just come here any expect dinner at 18.00, because we could eat at 5 or maybe first at 7, so in the end I said no, you cannot live here. Then

he went to a nursing home, where he was in 10 years, and managed to stay at 8 different places during this time, here in the city. And in the end, very very demented.
(Sanne)

It is not only them to take care of the parents in their family. Depending on where their parents and other family members live, the primal help may come from their siblings. Gunhild mentioned that her sister mainly took care of her father after her mother's death.

I have three siblings (a brother and sisters), still living in Randers, and after my mother died, it was my sister who lived next door to him and who cooked for him, he would come to them every day to eat. (Gunhild)

It was possible for her father to buy meals from the public sector, however, she mentioned;

I think... I just think it was best for him not to have it brought in from outside.
(Gunhild)

She thinks that the family's support was better for her father than the public service at least in terms of cooking. Nonetheless, this does not mean that she would also like to get similar support from her children as shall be seen below.

Oscar's mother was demented and partly blind, that ultimately made her live in a nursing home. Looking back the situation at that time made him reflect on his views in the following way;

The best solution to it would be that it happened in the same way to me, as it did with my father. I mean one minute you are here and the next you are not. Because my experience with nursing homes are not the best, but you can't expect it to be, especially good because people are different, and I mean, and things like dementia that is given in various degrees, some may get affected a little, while others are completely in their own world and can't even eat, I've seen it in the nursing home, actually it was frightening really frightening, I mean I wouldn't wish even my worst enemy to be in a situation like that. Because that is not, that is definitely not a life.
(Oscar)

Anne added that;

I think it is because one has seen how it can happen, it must be terrible to be

dependent on others, now here I don't mean cleaning and these kinds of practical matters this we can work out, but about yourself personally "personal care". I really think that is terrible. (Anne)

For both husband and wife, to a large extent, their past experiences with care for the elderly influenced constructing their views especially on nursing care.

'Being independent' and 'take care of themselves' are also the value the three couples somehow share. Anne said;

One hopes that you can take care of yourself, our generation has also been raised to believe that we can "take care of ourselves" and we want to, and as long as we are able we must do so, and then I hope that I will never have to go to a nursing-home. (Anne)

When the conversation touched upon their future and preferable care, Bjarne simply said that

We are hoping to keep in shape by doing sports, in many years to come. (Bjarne)

He emphasised that he and his wife would like to stay healthy as long as possible. They both go to a gym for training and play tennis together in order to keep their physical capability.

Sanne also said;

It is not always good to stay in your own home as possible, it depends on the situation, but as long as the both of us are here, then I would reckon that we would try and stay independent and take care of ourselves, and I believe that when we ask for things from the children like we do sometimes today, especially with computers and such, of which I have no understanding. (Sanne)

On the one hand, the couples have helped and taken care of their parents and sometimes other members of the family in the similar age. On the other hand, the couples do not want to rely on their children as much as their parents did. Bjarne mentioned the difference between the relationship of them and their children and of them and their parents.

It (their children taking care of him and his wife) would be difficult as they are living in other places. It is not only because of their work, but our two daughters are doctors and our son is vice president in a technology company so they won't have time to

take care of us. (Bjarne)

5-3. Changing Ways of Mutual Communication and Support

The couples see the different patterns of way of helping each other within the family compared to old time with their parents and the current time with their children. Bjarne mentioned,

Generations evolve, and new patterns arise, the elderly become more self-sufficient and the kids are loosened from their parents in this way. I think it has to do with a general development in society, people are more used to take care of themselves, you no longer have the patriarchal system where you are centred around the father. The kids are no longer dependent on their parents, and the parents can see that they have a new role. (Bjarne)

Gunhild also sees the transition in her relationship with her children and also in her children's relationship with their children compared with her relationship with her parents;

Before it was the father who took decisions and it was almost like the law. It's not like that anymore, because now (you) talk / negotiate about things, and with your own children it was also different because they were freer and had more autonomy. It was not like that in my childhood, what father decided could not be discussed, and that was how it was.

5-4. 'We' or 'I' – The Contrast to Children's Generation

Reflecting upon what the couples have seen in their children's and parents' lives, they have reconstructed the patterns of everyday life they have experienced. Some couples have mentioned these differences between their children's and their generations the following way;

[T]oday, you are not only one. So, you don't say I am getting a child, no *we* are getting a child, and so since both of them are attached to the labour market, that they then, its both the kitchen and, so with our own daughters family, there they are betting on her job, which is one where you do not get home at 4 in the afternoon. He cooks everyday, and she drops off the children, he would pick them up and cook when that need was there, and he still cooks everyday, and then she will do it on the weekends. So they share it, and so does the others, in a different way but I think its great that they share that burden. (Sanne)

In her narratives, she implies that their children share the burden however she did not.

[I]f I were to lose (his wife) now, I could really have to pick myself up to, make anything to eat because I have never done it. And I am not alone in that, ok you could say that our children, their generation is much more minded for doing things together, taking care of the babies, making the food and so on, but my generation is not accustomed to that. (Oscar)

[W]e were like everyone else, so, now we have lived in this house for about 47 years, and when our children were small, many mothers on this street were homemakers, and we had something socially together, but that kind of thing...that is how it was and now it is a different time. (Sanne)

The way she described why she has decided to quit a job and become a housewife as 'we were like everyone else' and 'that is how it was' suggests that she thinks, becoming a housewife was not a thing that she would have questioned to do, but rather it was self-evident in her everyday world at that time.

6. Concluding remarks

Older couples' narratives illustrate that their family and working lives were carried out in parallel to the process of the postwar development of Danish welfare state in which the life courses for men and women had been standardised through the several attempts to achieve gender equality. However, the stories of older couples show that it does not necessarily mean their experiences explicitly embodied the 'gender equality'. When they talk about their parents' generations, gender is a strong distinction of life trajectories, whereas in the narratives of the children's generations, 'individual' is more visible regardless of gender.

Seeing the children's generation, on the one hand, the development of child care - e.g. day care services, introduction of parental leave - was understood as the positive change especially among women who have been a main care taker. On the other hand, de-institutionalisation of elder care may have led the couples to perceive institutional care as for the very terminal period of life associated with dementia, and going to live there is extremely negative for some of the couples.

As the existing literature shows, 'de-familialised' welfare state does not necessarily discourage to providing familial care and support. The older couples frequently help or helped family members (parents, children and grandchildren) and *vice versa*. However, the interviewed couples' understandings suggest that they do not feel obligated to take care of the family members, even though there is almost no other option in some occasions.

This paper is based on a preliminary result from the ongoing PhD project and therefore the analysis has not been concluded. Some differences would be found in the results from interviews with Japanese counterparts, and also the following points should be taken into consideration; age difference among interviewees, having children or not, receiving care or not. Nevertheless, the couples narratives overall illustrated the continuous interactions of social services and their everyday lives. What the couples have seen influence the choices, decisions and future views to a great extent.

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